

"Narco-Embarcaderos" as a Logistical Tactic to Support Hashish Trafficking in Southern Spain

Hashish trafficking between Spain and Morocco across the Strait of Gibraltar is nothing new and has flourished over the last two decades, but as *El País* reports, drug traffickers are employing a relatively new trafficking tactic involving enclosed boat slips known as “narco-embarcaderos” along the Guadarranque River.

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A ring of "narco-embarcaderos" built to traffic hashish from Morocco is captured in a joint operation by Spain's National Police and Revenue Agency. (Photo: Spanish National Police)

Hashish trafficking between Spain and Morocco across the Strait of Gibraltar is nothing new and has flourished over the last two decades, but as *El País* reports, drug traffickers are employing a relatively new trafficking tactic involving enclosed boat slips known as “narco-embarcaderos” (wharves) along the Guadarranque River.

This phenomenon draws from tactics used along the Barbate and Guadalquivir Rivers (Spain's southwest coast) in the sense that it uses the river as an entry point and may even involve drug drops at pre-coordinated points.

However, it represents a change to historic river trafficking in the region because it effectively utilizes established infrastructure in luxury communities as a logistics and storage base for its fleet of inflatable fast-boats and large-scale shipments of hashish.

Importance of the Guadarranque River

The Guadarranque River is located along Spain's southeast coast and represents key terrain for traffickers as its estuary is located just 1 km from the Bay of Algeciras, which leads directly to open sea and the Strait of Gibraltar.

It is a relatively short river that measures only 43 kilometers and has been classified as one of the most "unnavigable rivers" in the country, making it a trafficker's haven as authorities are only able to monitor the mouth of river during low tide.

In comparison, the Guadalquivir River is one of the longest and most navigable in the country, and while this route is popular amongst traffickers, fast-boats are frequently intercepted by authorities who conduct continuous patrols along its waters.

The Guadarranque's privileged location is also apparent from a real-estate perspective, as the high-end homes along the waterway are fully equipped with efficient waterway access and ample concealment for fast-boats looking to move into covered *embarcaderos*.

And although homes along the Guadalquivir River do have *embarcadero* access in some cases, Lieutenant Pablo Tosco of the Algeciras Anti-Drug Task Force reports that the *embarcadero* tactic is much more prevalent along the Guadarranque River than any other fluvial route in the country.

During an interview with Spanish daily *El Mundo*, Tosco confirmed that the Guadarranque is the official logistical base of hashish traffickers in Southern Spain. Emilio Miro, the Algeciras Anti-Drug Chief, reiterated this idea by stating that, "the homes are used to store fast-boats where they can quickly reach high sea.

These locations are also used as refueling points and may be used to store hashish shipments until they can be moved to other distribution points." In some areas along the Guadarranque, *El Mundo* reported, traffickers rent out *embarcaderos* for approximately \$6,800 a month.

In addition to serving as logistical bases, *embarcaderos* help traffickers mitigate risk related to the seizure of shipments and fast-boats alike. On any given day, *El Mundo* reports, 7-10 fast-boats depart from the Guadarranque River to Morocco or just off its coast where they pick up multi-ton hashish shipments valued at millions of dollars.

Upon return, the *embarcaderos* are key to a fast escape in case radars detect the shipment, as fast-boats can quickly pull into their hiding spots undetected.

This ability not only saves shipments, but also keeps the fast-boat fleet safe and functional, which is important, because hashish traffickers use this mode of transportation to move their cargo nearly exclusively.

Furthermore, acquiring fast-boats can be difficult, as both Spain and Morocco have outlawed the sale of the inflatable versions commonly used by hashish traffickers, which has forced buyers to look for options in Holland and other areas of Europe.

Spanish authorities are well aware of the *embarcadero* tactic, but traffickers stay one step ahead by strategically placing lookouts in commonly patrolled areas before fast-boats leave the *embarcadero*.

These individuals are usually couples or females, because they are less likely to arouse suspicion according to *El País*.

An added complication posed by traffickers to authorities is that fast-boats commonly return back to Spanish territory camouflaged among groups of illegal immigrants attempting to enter into the country.

When this happens, Spain's Integral System of Exterior Vigilance (SIVE) detects the fast-boats, but naturally assigns priority to helping immigrants and possible danger instead of pursuing drug shipments.

Despite previous setbacks in thwarting shipments and the use of *embarcaderos*, Spain's Secretary of State for Security announced a plan in August 2015 that may end the *embarcadero* tactic along the Guadarranque River once and for all.

The new plan, which is now underway and due for completion in the summer of 2016, involves driving metal posts into the riverbed, about 2.2 meters apart, to prevent the inflatable fast-boats, which typically have a beam of around 3 meters, from getting through.

As reported by *El País*, the latest bid to halt the drug traffickers aims to be a "permanent solution" that uses "metal elements along the lines of sheet piling, running parallel and equidistant to each other along the width of the river and facing upstream, creating a staggered pattern dug into the riverbed."

If successful, the Spanish government will effectively cut off the hashish industries' logistical support base in Guadarranque, which will likely result in temporary supply shortages and permanent trafficking shifts.